

COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT IN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

INTRODUCTION

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and its successor, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), broadened the role of planning in transportation project development. There has also been an increased federal emphasis on considering potential community impacts during the NEPA process (the environmental documentation process established by the National Environmental Policy Act). At the same time, there has been a national effort to integrate and streamline the transportation planning and NEPA processes to eliminate duplication and increase the efficiency of federal, state and local agencies in responding to increasing demands on the nation's transportation infrastructure. The confluence of these three initiatives has resulted in increased emphasis on assessing potential community impacts resulting from transportation planning decisions.

The primary agencies involved in the transportation planning process in the State of Florida are the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), the local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) in the urbanized regions of the state, and local governments. The manner in which community impact assessment activities could be integrated into the transportation planning responsibilities of each agency is discussed below.

THE FEDERAL ROLE

The federal government can promote community impact assessment activities where it has a role in the local transportation planning process. That includes:

- The promulgation of rules and regulations to guide state and local planning activities and to implement federal transportation law;
- The oversight of state and local transportation activities, typically through the review and approval of transportation planning products; and
- Participation in the funding of transportation activities including planning, environmental documentation, design, right-of-way acquisition, construction, mitigation activities and the development of transit plans and services.

Rules & Regulations

In recent years, federal agencies have issued a variety of rules and regulations to guide the transportation planning process. Among those are seven broad planning areas that MPOs must consider during the development of long-range

transportation plans. These seven planning areas relate to a number of community impact areas, including:

- Economics,
- Safety,
- Mobility,
- Accessibility,
- Environment, and
- Quality of life.

Considering and documenting these broad planning areas will provide a valuable foundation for later assessment of potential community impacts.

In May 2000, the federal agencies issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking that was intended to coordinate and streamline the planning and NEPA processes. The proposed rule states that in order to coordinate and streamline the planning process and the NEPA process, the planning process shall provide the following to the NEPA process:

- An identification of an initial statement of purpose and need for transportation investments;
- Findings and conclusions regarding purpose and need, identification and evaluation of alternatives studied in planning activities (including but not limited to the relevant design concepts and scope of the proposed action), and identification of the alternative included in the plan;
- An identification of the planning documents that provide the basis for the purpose and need statement, the findings and conclusions regarding purpose and need, the identification and evaluation of alternatives studied in planning activities, and identification of the alternative included in the plan; and
- Formal expressions of policy support or comment by the planning process participants for the purpose and need statement, the findings and conclusions regarding purpose and need, the identification and evaluation of alternatives studied in planning activities, and identification of the alternative included in the plan.

The proposed rule also states that the following sources of information shall be utilized to satisfy the proposed planning requirements (at a locally agreed upon level of detail):

- Inventories of economic, social and environmental resources and conditions;
- Analysis of economic, social and environmental consequences; and
- Evaluation of transportation benefits, other benefits, costs and consequences.

Additionally, the proposed rule requires the early review during the NEPA process of the above listed products of the planning process to determine their appropriate use.

Further, all agencies with subsequent project level responsibilities are encouraged to:

- Participate in planning analyses and studies to the extent possible;
- Provide early identification of key concerns for later consideration and analysis as needed; and
- Utilize the sources of information developed and identified as part of the planning process.

These activities will improve the transfer of data from the planning process to the NEPA process, improve interagency communication and coordination on community impact issues, and ultimately improve the quality of and broad-based support for the existing and planned regional transportation system.

Oversight

The federal agencies review and also approve a variety of the products resulting from the regional transportation planning process. The federal agencies approve MPO UPWPs and the state's TIP (which is comprised of those projects identified in MPO TIPs in urban areas and those projects appearing in the FDOT Adopted Work Program in rural areas). They could, in their approval role, encourage increased attention and funding for community impact assessment activities both within the UPWP and the TIP.

In addition, the federal agencies review and comment on the long-range transportation plans developed by MPOs. Based on the direction given by the existing and proposed metropolitan planning rules, the LRTP can be reviewed with a critical eye toward the provision of data and analysis to the NEPA process.

Another opportunity to encourage the integration of community impact assessment considerations into the transportation planning process is during the regular federal certification of the regional transportation planning process. Every few years, the federal agencies certify that MPOs are conducting a 3-C planning process and otherwise meeting the planning requirements of federal legislation. In this role, the federal agencies can stress the importance of integrating community impact assessment activities into all of the normal processes of the local MPO. Where MPOs are required to be incorporating community impact assessment activities, it is within the authority of the federal agencies to withhold certification until corrective actions are taken to address community impacts in the transportation planning process.

Funding

Much of the funding for transportation activities comes from the federal government. This presents yet another opportunity for the federal agencies to encourage the integration of community impact assessment into the transportation process. Designated funds could be made available to MPOs, States or local governments to implement community impact assessment during or in addition to their standard planning activities.

THE STATE ROLE

FDOT is involved in the transportation planning process in a number of ways, including:

- Participating in the transportation planning activities of the MPOs in urbanized areas;
- Retaining primary responsibility for transportation planning activities in rural areas, in cooperation with local jurisdictions;
- Conducting special transportation planning studies, and
- Reviewing local government comprehensive plans and Developments of Regional Impact (DRI) for their potential impacts on the state transportation system.

Transportation Planning Process

Like the federal agencies, the oversight role is probably the best opportunity for the FDOT to encourage the integration of community impact assessment into the transportation planning process. FDOT representatives actively participate in the MPO process and review and comment on the products of the transportation planning process. In this capacity, FDOT can encourage increased focus on the potential community impacts that may result from transportation planning decisions. In rural areas, where FDOT has the primary transportation planning responsibility, community impact assessment activities can be directly integrated into FDOT planning activities and transferred to the FDOT staff responsible for conducting the NEPA process.

FDOT District 5: State Road 25 Report

The Ocala/Marion County Comprehensive Plan and LRTP called for the widening of SR 25 through the City of Belleview from two lanes to three or more. While the MPO wanted the road widened to improve regional mobility, residents and business owners in the City of Belleview expressed strong concerns that the proposed project would significantly impact the community by displacing small businesses, residences and a church and removing parking along SR 25. FDOT initiated a special study prior to preliminary design to work through the community's concerns and identify a potential solution that met the transportation need.

A study group was formed that consisted of FDOT Planning and Environmental Management Office staff, the MPO, and the City of Belleview. This group met with corridor residents, business owners and other corridor stakeholders to assess their specific concerns and to solicit their thoughts on a final project that would address the identified needs and concerns. The final result was a recommendation to widen SR 25 to a three-lane section with sidewalks, undesignated bike lanes, and curb and gutter treatments. Also, FDOT assisted in the development of alternative parking outside the right-of-way of SR 25. The selection of this design minimized the need for right-of-way acquisition, provided alternative parking and enhanced pedestrian and bicycle facilities while improving the carrying capacity of the road.

Special Studies

The FDOT also conducts special transportation studies to determine transportation needs along specific corridors or in specific sub-areas of a region. These studies are often prompted by particular community concerns related to a proposed transportation improvement. Through these special studies, FDOT can identify those community concerns and address them early in the project development process. In the long run, this can result in an action that addresses transportation needs in a manner that is acceptable to community stakeholders at a reduced cost to FDOT in terms of both time and money.

Land Use Planning

In reviewing DRI documents and local comprehensive plans, FDOT can identify the potential impacts to the transportation system from planned development, growth and changes in land use. In turn, these potential impacts to the transportation system can be evaluated for potential impacts to the local community, both in terms of the direct impacts associated with changed conditions on the existing transportation system and the potential impacts related to needed improvements that would be required to accommodate the increased demands placed on the existing transportation system.

THE ROLE OF MPOs

MPOs can integrate community impact assessment activities into their planning programs in a variety of ways. Some MPOs have become involved in community impact assessment through the requirements placed upon them by federal transportation law (particularly those introduced by ISTEA and continued by TEA 21). MPOs are required to:

- Prepare a metropolitan long-range transportation plan (LRTP);
- Prepare a list of prioritized projects and a transportation improvement program (TIP);
- Maintain a 3-C transportation planning process; and
- Develop a Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP).

In all of these federally required activities, MPOs have the opportunity to integrate community impact assessment activities. Additionally, MPOs also undertake activities of their own that could focus on community impact assessment. These activities include:

- “Visioning”;
- Reviewing state and local transportation projects; and
- Providing training, education and technical assistance to local agencies and interested stakeholder groups.

LRTP & Project Programming

During the long-range transportation planning process, MPOs forecast the future transportation needs of the region and identify projects to address those

needs. The list of needed projects is then constrained by reasonably anticipated future funding over the planning horizon of the LRTP using a variety of selection criteria. MPOs could include potential community impacts (community cohesion, aesthetics, environmental justice, economics, etc.) among those selection criteria. For example, one of the potential criteria that could be used might be the proximity of each alternative to a regionally significant cultural landmark or some other equally important regional asset.

Available funds are then allocated to those projects included in the LRTP through the annual development of a list of prioritized projects and the five-year TIP. In developing the list of prioritized projects, an MPO is required to indicate the methodology used for setting those priorities and indicate how the project priorities were selected from the LRTP. Potential community impacts could be integrated into the prioritization methodology. While this activity could involve detailed data collection and analysis using secondary data sources, a more cost efficient and effective method would be to collect information on community concerns during small neighborhood meetings and conduct a qualitative assessment of potential impacts.

MPOs could also serve an important role in developing a community profile database during the LRTP development process. Information that could be collected might include, but not be limited to:

- Concentrations of traditionally underrepresented populations (African-Americans, Hispanics, etc.) in the transportation decision making process;
- The location of regionally significant cultural resources;
- The location of regionally significant employment centers; or
- The name and address of community leaders and other community contacts.

Charlotte County MPO: LRTP Data Collection

The Charlotte County MPO collects extensive data on local communities as part of its long-range transportation planning process. The MPO focuses particularly on data related to environmental justice issues including such things as minority representation at MPO activities and defining the physical boundaries of minority and low-income neighborhoods within the MPO boundaries. This data is contained in a database and a geographic information system to facilitate profiling and assessment activities.

The MPO has also documented public concerns related to transportation issues and proposed corrective actions to address those concerns. Among the methods used by the MPO to collect this data was a “project selection” survey. In this activity 2,403 randomly selected members of the public were asked to fund needed projects given limited available dollars. This forced the respondents to prioritize regional improvements. The survey had a 38 percent response rate.

3-C Transportation Planning Process

MPOs are required to maintain an ongoing 3-C (continuing, cooperative and comprehensive) transportation planning process in their respective metropolitan area. This process involves the various committees of the MPO as well as an ongoing public involvement program. This process could be used to educate the various constituencies involved in transportation planning on issues related to community impact assessment. Also, community impact considerations could be integrated into the deliberations of the various MPO subcommittees during the MPO normal decision-making process.

UPWP and Special Studies

MPOs fund special studies as part of their normal planning activities funded from the UPWP. These are often sub-area or corridor studies to identify causes of facility degradation and alternative solutions. Community impact assessment considerations could be integrated into these studies in terms of the potential impacts of not correcting the existing condition on the surrounding community and the potential impacts of the identified alternative solutions.

Also, special studies could be conducted that focus exclusively on community impact assessment. These studies could range from the development of broad community profiles, to an inventory of physical assets (historic structures, community facilities, aesthetic resources, etc.) in a specific community, to the identification of community characteristics or values based on surveys of neighborhood residents or interviews of neighborhood leaders.

Tallahassee/ Leon County MPO: LAPD Process

In November 1993, the Local Advanced Project Delineation (LAPD) process was initiated by the Tallahassee/Leon County MPO to identify local concerns and issues prior to including any road projects on the MPO's work plan. For each LAPD study, several public meetings are held and technical information is reviewed to identify environmental, land use, recreation, storm water, and other neighborhood issues that would affect any future roadway plans. LAPD studies have been completed for several corridors and the information has helped guide project decision-making.

“Visioning”

Although the long-range transportation planning process allows MPOs to comprehensively allocate anticipated transportation funds based on projected regional growth, it limits the ability of an MPO to consider what the “desired” level of growth should be and what transportation facilities would be required to accommodate that level of “desired” growth. This is because the traditional long-range planning process takes projected land use and growth as a given based on local, regional and state land use and development plans. Alternative land development and distribution scenarios are rarely analyzed during this process.

To overcome this constraint, MPOs could go beyond the standard process and undertake comprehensive “visioning” activities of their own. This would provide MPOs an opportunity to step away from the narrow resource allocation question to address more fundamental questions related to preferred growth patterns, attitudes toward local versus regional mobility by various modes, the role of transportation in advancing desired regional quality of life, and other community impact assessment concepts. This broader consideration of future conditions and desires fosters the development of principles and strategies that can guide the decision-making process, particularly by clarifying community values and objectives.

Tallahassee/Leon County MPO: LRTP “Visioning” Approach

Through a sub-area or sectors strategy, the Tallahassee/Leon county MPO is identifying individual community needs and developing a “vision” for Tallahassee. Those sub-area “visions” are then being used in the long-range transportation process to develop objectives and policies. For example, the plan promotes new growth and development in southern Tallahassee/Leon County through the Southern Strategy. The purpose of the Southern Strategy is to promote quality development in the southern portion of Tallahassee by devoting more resources to transportation improvements in this area.

Education, Training & Technical Assistance

MPOs can also provide educational outreach and training programs on various community impact assessment subjects. These could include programs to acquaint local staff and others involved in transportation decision making with community impact assessment techniques. Similar seminars could be held for local stakeholder groups such as business organizations, neighborhood associations, environmental groups and other special interest groups. Also, MPO staff could hold community impact assessment information sessions for local elected officials to introduce the concepts to newly elected officials and update and refresh the knowledge base of the rest. These educational activities would make all involved parties familiar with the general concepts embodied in community impact assessment.

In addition to training and education, MPOs could undertake technical assistance activities to assist local governments in community impact assessment. Activities could be as limited as the provision of relevant sources of data to detailed analysis of specific community issues.

Project Review

Another method that an MPO could use to integrate community impact assessment activities into local transportation planning practices is through their role as reviewers of state and local transportation projects. For example, an MPO could regularly review local highway project designs in the region to assure that sidewalks, bike paths, transit facilities or other desired project treatments are incorporated in a manner that enhances neighborhood mobility. Or the MPO could form a community impact review team that is charged with reviewing all local and state projects for potential community impacts. This

team could work with the project designers and report their findings back to the MPO committees for further appropriate action.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Local governments also have an important role in the transportation planning process and have opportunities to address community impacts in their planning and development review activities.

Land Use & Transportation Planning

Local governments are responsible for comprehensive planning activities within their jurisdictional boundaries. The local comprehensive plan covers all subject matter related to growth and land development and contains a wealth of data relevant to community impact assessment. The first source an agency conducting a community impact assessment should look for local data on a community or neighborhood is the local comprehensive plan. Local governments could improve the value of that data for community impact assessment purposes by focusing on data that might be difficult to find from another source or time consuming to collect as part of a transportation project. This data might include such things as the relative proportion of senior citizens in a community, local property values or the relative level of community cohesion in various areas.

Hillsborough County: Social Information Network

The Hillsborough County City-County Planning Commission has organized an initiative called the Social Information Network. The program objective is to develop an extensive database of available community and neighborhood data sources, often referred to as “metadata.” This database directs interested users to the primary data sources for a variety of information categories. Organizations involved include neighborhood associations, health care related agencies, special interest organizations, local government agencies and more. While it is not a one-stop source of information, it is a roadmap for where the information is located and will greatly simplify the task of data collection for conducting a community impact assessment in Hillsborough County.

Local governments could also incorporate community impact assessment techniques in developing the transportation and land use elements of the local comprehensive plan and when implementing the plan through local regulations. This might include such activities as assessing the potential impact of traffic derived by a new land use on neighborhood mobility, evaluating land use alternatives or determining the potential impact of a proposed local road on community facilities and services.

Another opportunity for local governments to contribute to community impact assessment activities is if they implement a community indicators program. Indicator programs attempt to assess the well being of communities through the establishment of specific measurable indicators and tracking them through time. For example, a measurable indicator of neighborhood mobility might be the

number of local streets with sidewalks or the number of transit connections to regional employment centers.

Special Studies

Like MPOs and FDOT, local governments often fund special transportation studies. These studies generally focus on the identification of transportation problems on a specific corridor or in a specific sub-area of their jurisdiction. Alternative solutions are also typically identified in these studies, as are potential funding sources. Community impacts could be assessed as part of these studies.

Orange County: RCA and Sub-Area Planning Processes

Orange County conducts special studies to determine transportation needs and identify community issues and potential impacts. Orange County has established a Roadway Conceptual Analysis (RCA) Process for county road projects that mimics the project development and environment (PD&E) process conducted by FDOT. The purpose of the RCA study is to determine the improvements necessary to Orange County roads due to increasing traffic from existing and expected development. RCA studies document the analysis required for Orange County to reach a decision on the type, design and location of improvements to county roadway. The analysis considers all social, economic and environmental impacts of the proposed improvements. RCA studies place special emphasis on public involvement in order to best capture the sentiment of the potentially impacted communities. Orange County also conducts sub-area studies that look at more than one corridor at a time to determine transportation needs. These studies, like the RCA studies, also have a large public involvement component aimed at identifying community concerns early in project development.

MPO Involvement

In addition to the activities that local governments can undertake on their own, local governments can also involve themselves in community impact assessment activities through the MPO process. Primarily representatives from local governments comprise the MPO committees. As such, they can assist in the assessment of community impacts during the MPO process. Also, some MPOs receive funding directly from their member governments to supplement federal and state funds. Local governments could insist upon increased focus community impact assessment in the regional transportation planning process as a condition of continued funding.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Integrating community impact assessment activities into transportation planning would increase the effectiveness of transportation decision-making and result in quality transportation projects that address a broad range of community needs. The challenge will be finding ways to integrate community impact assessment into already established transportation practices. It will take flexibility, creativity and commitment. In the long run, everybody will be better served.